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[The Arizona Republic](#)

For more than a quarter century, the debate over the [South Mountain](#) Freeway has largely been a question of "where."

In that time, homeowners in Ahwatukee Foothills waited for an answer. The proposed route would require demolishing homes and churches and cutting a swath through a quiet neighborhood as the pavement pushed its way around South Mountain toward the West Valley.

This week, the question of where is set to be answered, finally.

But in Ahwatukee, the wait is far from over. Only after the last parcel is bought and bulldozers arrive will neighbors know the freeway is coming.

Transportation officials at the [Maricopa Association of Governments](#) will vote Wednesday to approve the complete route for the freeway. A week later, the MAG Regional Council is expected to give the final OK.

The route to be approved looks much the same as it did in the early sketches from the 1980s. But that's not because of any kind of consensus.

Over the years, cities, residents and planners have debated, proposed, argued: Where to run the road's western end - they settled on 59th Avenue. Whether to push it south onto [Gila River](#)

Reservation land - an idea tribal officials have twice rejected. Whether to make it a high-speed freeway or a low-speed parkway - the plan now is for an eight-lane freeway much like other freeways in the Valley.

After the upcoming decision, the question will no longer be "where" but "how." State transportation officials take over. Logistics for construction will take several more years. Actual work could start by 2013 - three decades after the first MAG plans.

Along the way, the route could be derailed again if environmental reports stall it or if MAG officials decide yet again to weigh a change in the route.

Some residents keep hoping and pushing for some kind of breakthrough to stall, reroute or stop the road.

The rest keep waiting.

Opponent hopes to keep stalling freeway plans

David Caplan wouldn't mind if the debate over the South Mountain Freeway went on forever. He wants to keep the freeway as far as possible from his backyard, which is about two blocks away from where the route would run along Pecos Road.

In 2002, Caplan moved with his wife and two children to a house in the Foothills Reserve, one of the most remote subdivisions in Ahwatukee Foothills.

Caplan, a district sales manager for a nutrition-supplements company, said he knew about the planned Loop 202 extension when he bought the house but didn't think much about it. He figured his family would have moved on by the time construction might start.

But his family now is used to [hikes](#) in the desert, fresh air and the quiet of nearby South Mountain Park. 2013 seems much closer than it did seven years ago.

"We would definitely hear the noise and breathe the pollution if the freeway were out there," he said. "The 202 is like a cloud that hangs over us. You feel like you are in a paradise that is about to be destroyed."

Many people bought homes near the route, considering the debate would go on long after they had gone. Some figured there was so much opposition the road would never be built at all.

Although the Phoenix [City Council](#) has no official stand on the freeway, it has repeatedly approved residential zoning in or near the route.

Phoenix's principal planner, Michelle Dodds, said it would have been difficult for the city to say no "based on something that might or might not happen."

Now that the freeway decision is closer, Caplan has organized an e-mail group for his neighbors. He keeps them informed about meetings and decisions involving the freeway and said he is ready to organize formal protests if freeway builders come near his home. "There are going to be women with baby carriages and protestors laying down on Pecos Road to prevent this from happening."

Prospect of moving doesn't upset church

If any institution in Ahwatukee Foothills represents neutrality on the South Mountain Freeway, it's [Mountain Park Community Church](#).

The church's sloping roof represents a nomad's tent, an architectural feature meant to symbolize that the church is not a building but the people inside.

It's an apt philosophy for Mountain Park, built in 1998 on 11 acres on the northeastern corner of 24th Street and Pecos Road - directly in the path of the planned South Mountain Freeway.

Church administrator Dave Swisher regularly attends meetings about the proposed Loop 202 extension. He said Mountain Park officials were aware that their scenic location was in the freeway path when they bought it for \$500,000 in 1995.

But the price was well below the market, Swisher said, and Mountain Park had outgrown the Mountain Pointe High School facilities it had been using.

"The reason we got the land so cheap was because of the freeway," he said. "On the other hand, we knew the freeway would be years away, if it is built at all."

Although church members have varying views on the freeway, Swisher said Mountain Park itself has a neutral stand on the alignment.

"If we are supposed to move, that is God's will," he said.

While leaving Mountain Park's location would not be easy, Swisher said, he expects the church one day will need more acreage. Attendance has more than tripled in the past decade, and officials expect it will continue to rise.

"There is no way we can find something with the aesthetics of this property," he said. "On the other hand, only 6 acres are useable."

The Arizona Department of Transportation, meanwhile, owns a vacant 11-acre site near 48th Street and Pecos Road that could be traded for Mountain Park, ADOT spokesman Tim Tait said.

Not that Mountain Park is in a hurry to make the swap, Swisher said.

"We just remodeled our children's classrooms and recarpeted the lobby," he said.

Homeowners in limbo awaiting freeway plan

Katrina Dunne and Sheryl Moret knew they were buying houses in a proposed freeway path.

They figured that would never be a problem.

Either the South Mountain Freeway would go through their neighborhood and the state would buy their houses, they figured - or the freeway wouldn't, and they could keep their homes or sell them.

It was a question they didn't worry about back then. The economy was good, and they hoped to live there for a long time.

But now, they need an answer, any answer, and they don't have one.

Assuming the freeway does become reality, the state will still buy their houses. But that probably won't happen for several more years, because ADOT must do environmental reports and construction planning.

In the meantime, their houses won't be worth anything to another buyer - who would buy the house now, knowing it will be a road bed?

Road construction could start by 2013 - a long wait for homeowners like Moret and Dunne.

Both women need to sell their houses now because of their jobs. And while the housing collapse makes things harder for any seller, Dunne and Moret say they're truly stranded.

"We're in limbo," said Dunne, a computer worker now living in Houston. "What is someone like me supposed to do?"

Ahwatukee Foothills-based real-estate agent Christine Marek said the same thing about homes next to Pecos Road: "When I show homes, buyers refuse to see anything near or

bordering Pecos."

The neighborhood, Goldman Ranch, was once a desirable spot, within walking distance from Desert Vista High School. Current plans would demolish every home in the neighborhood.

"I don't think it would be such a bad thing to put a freeway through here," said Moret, gesturing toward her backyard on Pecos Road. "Traffic is terrible. The freeway is about progress."

But she can't wait much longer. An accountant, she expects to be laid off in March.

"Someone needs to step up to the plate," she said, "and make an intelligent decision about the future."

Opponents make final appeal to Gila River tribe

Freeway opponents have long looked south, in hopes that the new segment of Loop 202 could run on the Gila River Reservation.

Tribal leadership has rebuffed the idea, twice voting to bar any freeway on reservation land.

Now, MAG's plans for a route through Ahwatukee Foothills neighborhoods are nearly final. Still, some in Ahwatukee aren't giving up, offering an idea with a twist.

Federal land in the Estrella Mountains includes a location tribal officials consider to be part of their community. Backers now hope they can arrange a federal land swap. The tribe would get the Estrella land; the government would get a strip of reservation land for the freeway in exchange.

There are few details as to how the process would work. But Phoenix City Councilman Sal

DiCiccio, whose district includes Ahwatukee, is leading a charge to encourage state and federal officials to make a formal proposal to the tribal council.

And MAG Transportation Director Eric Anderson said officials from his agency agreed last week to meet with tribal officials about the freeway.

U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, who represents Tempe and Ahwatukee, is among those who would like to see the freeway on tribal land.

"In my mind we have got to work out something with the Gilas," Mitchell said.

But Anderson cautioned that the meeting still won't delay MAG's planned vote on the current route.

"One concern we have is giving the people in Ahwatukee false hope," he said.